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Kübler, Daniel ; Ott, Sarah ; Christmann, Anna

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# **Electoral pressure or deficit compensation? Online political communication by public agencies in Western European city-regions**

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## ***Abstract***

Today, internet is the most common tool for information and hence an obvious means for governments to be transparent about political institutions and processes. But how does online information work in complex governance networks, where the question who actually governs is difficult to answer? In the present paper, we explore two contradictory hypotheses on why public agencies involved in city-regional policy-making invest in websites to reach out to the wider public. A content analysis of thirty-two websites from agencies in eight European city-regions shows that electoral pressure is a strong incentive. Websites of agencies controlled by directly elected representatives are far more informative than websites of agencies that are disconnected from the democratic chain of delegation.

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The buzzword of the 'Smart City' conveys the notion that 'smartness' will be an important factor for wellbeing in the urban societies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Smart cities not only have the physical, technological and social infrastructure to serve the needs and tastes of (post-industrial) businesses and citizens. Smart cities are those who are able to manage this infrastructure in a way that is attentive to challenges, reactive to problems and adaptive to changes, all the while ensuring sustainable use of resources. Many accounts on the topic of smart cities focus on the contribution of modern information and communication technologies (ICT) in achieving 'smartness' of the urban system. It is clear that the 'smart city' cannot be reduced to the sole role of ICT. As Caragliu et al. have aptly put it, a city should be considered smart "when investments in human and social capital and traditional (transport) and modern (ICT) communication infrastructure fuel sustainable economic growth and a high quality of life, with a wise management of natural resources, through participatory governance" (Caragliu et al. 2011). The use of ICT is but one of several aspects of city management that, together and in combination with others, can contribute to achieve sustainable urban wellbeing.

While we acknowledge that ICT is not the only and probably not even the most important aspect of achieving smartness in the management of our cities, we think that, as one of the more novel aspects of urban management, investments in the use of ICT for urban management merit particular scholarly attention. This paper, then, focuses on one particular aspect of investments in ICT: the websites that agencies involved in the delivery of urban policies and services run in order to provide the public with information about their activities. More particularly, we focus on eight major cities located in four countries in Western Europe: Bern and Zurich (Switzerland), Berlin and Stuttgart (Germany), Paris and Lyon (France), as well as London and Birmingham (United Kingdom). In the Western European context - as elsewhere - the internet as a source of information is more important than ever before. According to the latest available figures, eighty-five percent of the population in the European Union were considered regular internet users in 2012 and therefore able to look for exactly that information they are interested in. The internet penetration rates are similarly high in the four countries under scrutiny here (Switzerland: 82.1%, Germany: 83.3%, France: 79.6%, United Kingdom: 83.6%).<sup>2</sup> Hence, the internet has become an attractive forum for public

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on research conducted for the project *Assessing the trend of new regionalism* in the framework of the NCCR Democracy at the University of Zurich, and was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

<sup>2</sup> Source: [www.internetworldstats.com](http://www.internetworldstats.com); accessed in May 2014.

actors for disseminating information and reaching out to the public. For public authorities and agencies across European cities, it has indeed become standard to run their own website and provide information about themselves and about their activities.

However, running a website is not cheap and, depending on the degree of sophistication of the website, requires considerable resources. But why do public agencies decide to invest their (scarce) resources in websites? In this paper, we examine the hypothesis that the efforts public agencies invest in websites providing information on their activities and allowing them to reach out to the public is linked to the pressures of public accountability they are exposed to. And we assume that the public accountability a given agency faces is a function of the institutional settings that organises the public influence on the agency through mechanisms of electoral democracy.

We will develop our argument in three steps. Section two sets the scene and focuses on the variety of governance arrangements that have emerged in Europe's large city-regions and formulates two contradictory hypotheses about the role that online political communication can play therein. The next section explains the research strategy and describes the data collected on thirty-two selected websites to explore these hypotheses. In the remainder of the paper, the results are presented and discussed.

## ***2. Governance, democracy and the internet***

### **2.1 Metropolitan regions and their governance**

Across the world, the twin forces of globalisation and urbanisation have led to the emergence of urban regions as functionally integrated territorial systems of economic production and social reproduction. These metropolitan areas not only constitute the spatial environment for an increasing majority of the world's citizens (Hoffmann-Martinot and Sellers 2005). More and more, they also become relevant spaces for policies and politics (Sellers et al. 2013). Metropolitan areas usually are the economic powerhouses of national economies and state authorities across the world have developed strategies aimed at increasing governance capacity at the level of metropolitan areas (Brenner 1999; Brenner 2003).

The modern metropolis is usually characterised by institutional fragmentation. Today's city regions usually span over large numbers of local jurisdictions or other subnational government territories. In most of these metropolitan areas, institutional reforms either failed or were unable to keep up with the pace of territorial extension. This does not mean, however,

that metropolitan areas are ungovernable or that they are ungoverned. Since the 1990s, researchers have increasingly emphasised the role of policy networks in metropolitan governance, thus discovering a “new regionalism” (see Savitch and Vogel 2009). As it turns out, hierarchical decision-making by comprehensive governmental institutions is not the only way to ensure area-wide metropolitan policy-making. Rather than on full-fledged “metropolitan governments” (Sharpe 1995), many metropolitan areas across the world nowadays rely on non-hierarchical forms of coordination and cooperation, where political actors act on the basis of agreements reached by negotiation. With respect to the effectiveness and quality of public services at the metropolitan-level new regionalism has been shown to provide a valid alternative for area-wide policy-making in a context of geopolitical fragmentation (see Kübler 2005).

Metropolitan regions are thus an example for complex governance networks where the question who actually governs is difficult to answer (Kübler and Schwab 2007, Kübler and Heinelt 2005, Phares 2004). In Western democracies, network governance in complex environments (Papadopoulos 2003) is often condemned with respect to democratic accountability. Indeed, network governance involves non-elected actors in decision-making, whose democratic accountability is not evident, most notably for the electorate. The democratic quality of network governance depends on its ‘anchorage’ in representative institutions and democratic practice (Sørensen and Torfing 2005). Prior research has shown that, indeed, network governance in metropolitan policy-making is a serious challenge to democratic accountability. While network governance increases inclusiveness of metropolitan policy-making by involving civil society actors, it results in blurring democratic accountability as policy responsibility is diluted among a large variety of policy-actors not all of whom are electorally accountable (Kübler and Schwab 2007). When area-wide governance relies on policy networks, democratically elected local councillors lose grip, and input-legitimacy is reduced (Plüss 2013). A historical study focusing on the change of mechanisms of institutionalised democratic control has shown that functional cooperation in metropolitan policy-making was often paralleled by a retreat of electoral (and/or direct democratic) politics to the benefit of de-politicised technocratism (Koch 2013).

## **2.2 The role of online information for policy-makers: two hypotheses**

What role does the internet play in this context? Beside the studies on the usage of new social media in politics, empirical analyses of political web sites have become popular to assess how the internet increases transparency and participation by easing the communication between

public actors and citizens. Most of the studies using this kind of analysis point out the impact that the Internet has on democracy, especially emphasising E-Democracy and E-Deliberation (i.e. Kies 2010; Kies et al. 2003; Hands 2005; Winklund 2005; Cap Gemini Ernst&Young 2003; Hale et al. 1999).

Numerous studies in the field of political and communication science have looked at the role the internet plays in electoral campaigns (Gulati 2004, Adler et al. 1998). The internet is widely used by political parties and politicians in general and it has been shown that the use and content of party and politicians' web sites can have an influence on the view of citizens (Schweitzer 2008; Römmele 2003; Calderaro 2010). Other authors have shown that the internet can increase transparency and helps reshaping the government's relationship with the citizens (Torres et al. 2006). They claim that the so-called E-Government forwards accountability, social inclusion and even empowers citizens to monitor the government's performance more closely (2006: 278), independently from electoral mechanisms of control.

From the perspective of the agencies involved in the delivery of metropolitan policies and public services, the use of tools for online communication thus bears interesting potentials for shaping their relationship with the wider public. We argue that their motives to make use of this potential varies according to the ways in which they are connected to institutionalised mechanisms of democratic control. An agency located *inside* the so-called "democratic chain of delegation" (see Bergman et al. 2000) going from citizens to public administration via parliament and government can be assumed to feel concerned by electoral pressures. Agencies outside this chain are, by design, insulated from electoral pressures. For a given agency, its location inside or outside the democratic chain of delegation thus entails fundamental differences regarding the way it seeks to relate to the wider public. However, the consequences of these different conditions on agencies' communication behaviour are, as yet unclear. Two hypotheses can be formulated.

On the one hand, we can argue that agencies located inside the democratic chain of delegation, as they are regularly exposed to electoral pressures, seek to present themselves to the public in a positive light and therefore adopt very active communication strategies that enable them to reach out to the public. Scott (2006: 343) formulates this goal of political online information for local politics very precisely: "municipal government Web sites can improve accountability through the electoral process. Citizens can be informed and better evaluate the performance of government and particular elected officials". We can therefore

hypothesise that agencies inside the democratic chain of delegation tend to invest more resources into online communication activities and their websites will be more sophisticated - as compared with agencies outside the democratic chain of delegation who are insulated from such pressures. We call this first hypothesis the ‘electoral pressure hypothesis’.

On the other hand, we can argue that agencies outside the democratic chain of delegation will use tools of online communication to compensate their insufficient democratic legitimacy. Complex governance structures do not make it easy for citizens to know who is accountable for policies, who is participating and how these people come to a decision. Informative web sites could help citizens to understand politics, which is known to be an important factor for satisfaction with democracy (Grosso and Ryzin 2011). Agencies outside the democratic chain of delegation are often criticised as suffering a democratic deficit and presented as lacking accountability. They will therefore seek to use online communication as a tool to better reach out to the public and gather support independently from electoral processes. To them, the internet appears as a neat tool to inform citizens about how what they do and why they do it. The hypothesis flowing from this is that, compared to agencies inside the democratic chain of delegation, agencies outside this chain will invest more resources in their websites, which will, in particular, more often include tools to interact with the public. We call this second hypothesis the ‘compensation hypothesis’.

### **3. Research design and method**

In this article, we set out to test these two contradictory hypotheses by looking at web sites run by a broad range of agencies involved in the delivery of policies and public services in the fields of public transport and economy promotion in eight major city regions in Western Europe. The rationale for the selection of these eight city-regions was to achieve variance on the independent variable, i.e. the location of agencies in the democratic chain of delegation. The four pairs of city-regions represent, for each country, both of the main models of metropolitan governance, i.e. full-fledged multi-purpose institutions (‘metro governments’) as well as complex network governance (‘new regionalism’) (Table 1). Given the specific underlying rationale of each of these two models, we can assume agencies inside the democratic chain of delegations to characterise the ‘metro government’ model, while agencies outside the chain of delegation will play a more important role in the ‘new regionalist’ setting. In Germany, we compare Stuttgart with the regional government *Verband Region Stuttgart* to Berlin-Brandenburg, which does not have any metropolitan government. *Grand Lyon* serves as an example for metropolitan government in France, whereas governance in the capital Paris



mainly relies on complex network governance. In the UK, the *Greater London Authority* is one of the most recent and prominent examples for an institutionalized metropolitan government in Europe. Birmingham, on the other hand, is a typical example for New Regionalism. In Switzerland, it was most difficult to select the cases, since no real metropolitan government exists. However, Bern and Zurich both have an organization called *Regionalkonferenz Bern Mittelland* and *Metropolitanraum Zurich*, respectively. Both organizations are not full-fledged institutions, but cooperation networks of the metropolitan area that can be considered halfway between a metropolitan government and the new regionalist model. All cases are shown in Table 1.<sup>3</sup>

**Table 1: Models of metropolitan governance in the eight city-regions**

Country	City region	Area-wide organisation	Model
Switzerland	Bern	Regionalkonferenz Bern-Mittelland	Networks / Institutionalized
	Zurich	Verein Metropolitanraum Zürich	Networks / Institutionalized
Germany	Berlin	-	Networks
	Stuttgart	Regionalverband Stuttgart	Metro government
France	Paris	-	Networks
	Lyon	Grand Lyon	Metro government
United Kingdom	London	Greater London Authority	Metro government
	Birmingham	-	Networks

### 3.1 Websites, agencies and the democratic chain of delegation

Within these eight city regions, a number of agencies were selected for the analysis of their online communication. Besides sufficient differentiation regarding the location of the agencies within the democratic chain of delegation, the objective of the selection rationale also was to identify agencies that are, indeed, relevant to policy-making in their city regions.

First of all we were looking for agencies concerned with general policy-coordination at the level of the city regions. For those city-regions with an institutionalised metropolitan government (Stuttgart, Lyons and London), this was not a problem, because all three metro governments do have a web presence. The same applies to both Swiss cases because there are, as mentioned above, two more or less institutionalized organizations, which both have a website as well. Due to the fact, that the Zurich *Metropolitanraum* has only limited fields of activity, the website of the Canton of Zurich was additionally included in the analysis, given that - as some observers have noted (e.g. Jouve 2003) - the canton of Zurich ‘behaves’ like a

<sup>3</sup> For detailed information about the governance structure of these city-regions see Heinelt and Kübler (2005), Hoffmann-Martinot and Sellers (2005), Lefèvre (2009), as well as Kübler (2012; 2013).

metropolitan government in some policy areas. For the Berlin-Brandenburg city-region, we chose the website for the so-called “capital region”, that was set up to represent this region online and is run jointly by the governments of the two *Länder* Berlin and Brandenburg. For the Parisian and the West Midlands (Birmingham) regions we chose two websites. Following the Swiss and the Berlin-Brandenburg example, the aim was to identify the website of a regional organization with ties to different municipal governments and whose area of activity comprises the actual city region. For Paris, the first is the website of a project called GrandParis<sup>4</sup> which comprises the actual Parisian metropolitan region but has only a very limited sphere of influence. The second is the website of the *région* “Ile de France”, the regional institution of this area, whose geographic boundaries are, however, smaller than the functional Paris city region. The Birmingham region proved to be the hardest case for the identification of an appropriate websites. The website finally chosen was run by the West Midlands Regional Assembly, an institution that was abolished in 2010 after the change of the national UK government. The webs presence is an archived website today. Therefore, we decided to look for an active website with similar requirements, which proved to be a difficult task. Eventually, we decided to analyse the website of the West Midlands Councils<sup>5</sup>, an organization which aims at a broader cooperation between the different city councils in the region.

Once these “main” websites had been identified, additional websites of agencies crucial for the delivery of public services in two fields of metropolitan policy-making were selected: public transport and economy promotion. Both of these field scan be seen as paramount to the development of metropolitan areas in general (see Brenner 2003). Public transport is a key infrastructure for city regional development, as it secures territorial connectivity and accessibility crucial to the competitiveness of a metropolitan economy in the international competition. Activities in economic promotion are equally important to city-regional development, as their goal is to attract new businesses to a metropolitan area, and/ or strengthening existing economic clusters. These two policy fields can, hence, be considered as exemplary for metropolitan policy-making more generally. Similarly to the choice of the ‘main websites’, some issues had to be solved in the selection of the policy-specific websites.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Today, the GrandParis website is no longer online because it was transformed into a project of the Ministère de l’Egalité des territoires et du Logement.

<sup>5</sup> The West Midlands Councils is now called West Midlands Employers.

<sup>6</sup> More precisely we had to deal with some issues concerning the selection of the “policy-specific” websites for Zurich, Paris and Birmingham. For Zurich, we chose the websites of the *Zürcher Verkehrsverbund* (ZVV), the organisation responsible for planning and running the public transportation services in the city-region, as well as the website of the Economic Promotion Organization, the *Greater Zurich Area*. Both have ties to the governments of the different cantons

This is why, in some city-regions, more than one policy-specific websites were chosen. All in all, thirty-two websites offered by thirty-two different agencies were identified (Table 2).

**Table 2: Agencies responsible for selected websites and location in the democratic chain of delegation**

City region	Website	Responsible agency	Chain of delegation
Bern	Main	Regionalkonferenz Bern Mittelland (RKB)	Indirect
	Economy (1)	RKB Sektion Wirtschaft	Indirect
	Economy (2)	Wirtschaftsraum Bern	Direct
	Transport	RKB Sektion Verkehr	Indirect
Zurich	Main (1)	Metropolitanraum Zürich	Indirect
	Main (2)	Kanton Zürich	Direct
	Economy	Greater Zurich Area	Outside
	Transport	Zürcher Verkehrsverbund	Indirect
Berlin	Main	Hauptstadtregion Berlin-Brandenburg	Indirect
	Economy (1)	HBB Sektion Wirtschaft	Indirect
	Economy (2)	Capital Region	Outside
	Transport (1)	HBB Sektion Verkehr	Indirect
Stuttgart	Transport (2)	Verkehrsverbund Berlin-Brandenburg	Indirect
	Main	Verband Region Stuttgart	Direct
	Economy	Wirtschaftsförderung Region Stuttgart	Indirect
	Transport	Verband Region Stuttgart, Verkehrspl.	Outside
Paris	Main (1)	Grand Paris	Outside
	Main (2)	Île de France	Direct
	Economy	Agence régionale de développement	Outside
	Transport (1)	Île de France	Direct
Lyon	Transport (2)	Stif	Indirect
	Main	Grand Lyon	Indirect
	Economy	Le site économique du Grand Lyon	Indirect
	Transport (1)	Grand Lyon	Indirect
Birmingham	Transport (2)	Sytral	Indirect
	Main (1)	West Midlands Regional Council	Indirect
	Main (2)	West Midlands Regional Assembly	Indirect
	Economy	Advantage West Midlands	Outside
London	Transport	West Midlands Local Transport Plan	Indirect
	Main	Greater London Authority	Direct
	Economy	Greater London Business & Economy	Direct
	Transport	GLA Transport Strategy	Direct

and communes involved. Both Parisian “policy-specific” webpages were chosen based on the “Île de France” Website – the information provided by *GrandParis* was not sufficient. Birmingham again represents a difficult case. The only economic-related website for this metropolitan area is the Regional Development Agency *Advantage West Midlands*. Similar to the Regional Assembly, AWM was abolished in 2012. Nevertheless, we included this archived website into our analysis due to the lack of alternatives. In case of the transport-related website we chose the one of the West Midlands Local Transport Plan, which handles the transport needs of the Birmingham area.

In a next step, the agencies responsible for the selected websites had to be qualified with respect to their location in the democratic chain of delegation. This was done on the basis of evidence drawn from in-depth case studies published elsewhere (Christmann 2013). More precisely, we categorized the agencies responsible for the selected websites according to the formal electoral accountability of their decision making body. Three categories were identified: agencies fall into the first category if their top decision-making body is composed only by representatives determined in direct general elections. This category thus includes agencies that are located directly within the democratic chain of delegation: the agency is under the direct control of democratically elected representatives. Agencies fall into the second category if their top decision-making body is formed exclusively by delegates of directly elected governments - appointed in indirect election, so to speak. While they are not completely disconnected with the democratic chain of delegation, the control that elected representatives have on them is more indirect. Agencies fall into the third category if their top decision-making body includes actors who are neither chosen in direct elections, nor appointed by elected bodies. This third category of agencies is the most disconnected from the democratic chain of delegation, as neither directly nor indirectly elected representatives have the total control over them. Most of the thirty-two selected websites - namely seventeen - are run by agencies who fall into the second category, i.e. located indirectly in the chain of delegation. Nine websites are run by agencies directly in the chain of delegation, and six websites are run by agencies whose top decision-making bodies are outside the democratic chain of delegation.

### **3.2 Analysing the websites: indices for information, interactivity and user-friendliness**

A cumulative index was created to qualify the selected websites' structure and content. Drawing on approaches found in the literature on the topic (Cyberspace Policy Research Group 2012; Kies et al 200; Schweitzer 2008) this index was constructed as to contain three dimensions: an information dimension, an interactivity dimension, as well as a user-friendliness dimension. For each of these dimensions, operational variables and indicators were defined, enabling a qualification of the selected websites according to a standard procedure.<sup>7</sup>

Indicators in the *information dimension* aim to measure the amount of information which is available on the website, as well as the accessibility of this information. This starts with the effort needed to find the website through a search engine and links, or whether the different

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<sup>7</sup> See Table 4 in the appendix for details.

websites do have a corporate design. It also includes measuring the extent to which web users are provided with information about the agency and its projects in order for them to understand decisions as well as their underlying processes- and identify those who can be held accountable. In total, the information dimension includes 18 indicators each of which can take a value between zero and one; the closer to one, the more comprehensive the information contained on the website on a given indicator.<sup>8</sup>

The second dimension qualifies the *interactivity* of a website. It measures the extent to which the visitors of the website can contact those responsible or participate in decision-making through the website. Two variables and the corresponding indicators allow to qualify whether the owner of the website is open to inputs, remarks and questions from users of the website. These indicators grasp the existence of E-Mail addresses, online feedback forms, comment-possibilities for published articles or if there is a special consultation website or other non-online possibilities to contact the organisation. Additionally, we include some features concerning the New Social Media, for example if an organisation has a Twitter or Facebook account and how often it is used or if it is possible to share articles or contents from the websites on one of these platforms. This seems to be important because – as pointed out before – these social networks present a platform to directly get in touch with citizens.<sup>9</sup>

The third dimension measures the *user-friendliness* of the website. It aims to measure the attractiveness and elaboration of the website's design as well as the ease to navigate on the website. Indicators scrutinize the existence of interactive elements, site maps, information in other languages, the possibility to download or order information and the up-to-dateness of press releases or the website in general. However, we pay special attention to the treatment of information (hence the questions concerning the up-to-dateness, the download/order possibilities and interactive elements) because there is no use for information if it is neither understandable nor easy to access. In this case, there is a possible maximum of eleven from 11 variables for every website.

The coding process was conducted in autumn 2012 by one of the authors of this paper. In order to increase the reliability of the coding procedure, coding rules and coder instructions

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<sup>8</sup> Not all of these variables are coded for the two types of websites as shown above. Some only make sense for the main page (i.e. the effort to find the main site) or for the transport and economic promotion pages (i.e. if there is a corporate design). The maximum is therefore 18 for the main page, although it does not include all variables, and 17 for the transport and economic promotion pages.

<sup>9</sup> One indicator (the time for answering an email) was only collected for the "main" websites. This means that the maximum for a transport or economy promotion page adds up to ten in comparison to the maximum of eleven points from the "main" page.

were explicated in a codebook. However, online data is short-lived and can become obsolete quite fast. Indeed, some of the websites under scrutiny changed in appearance during the coding procedure, got a new design or even became more or less informative. Moreover, two websites (WM Councils and GrandParis) went offline after the coding had taken place. These developments challenge the assessment of the reliability of our coding procedure.

## **4. Findings**

This section presents the results of the analysis of the selected websites. More precisely, we will focus on the three dimensions of the cumulative index constructed to measure the content of the selected websites. We will first present findings relevant to the main hypotheses of this analysis, i.e. comparing the content of websites according to the status of the agency responsible for it in the democratic chain of delegation. We will then have a closer look at the figures and break them down according to various criteria, in order to see how robust these findings are.

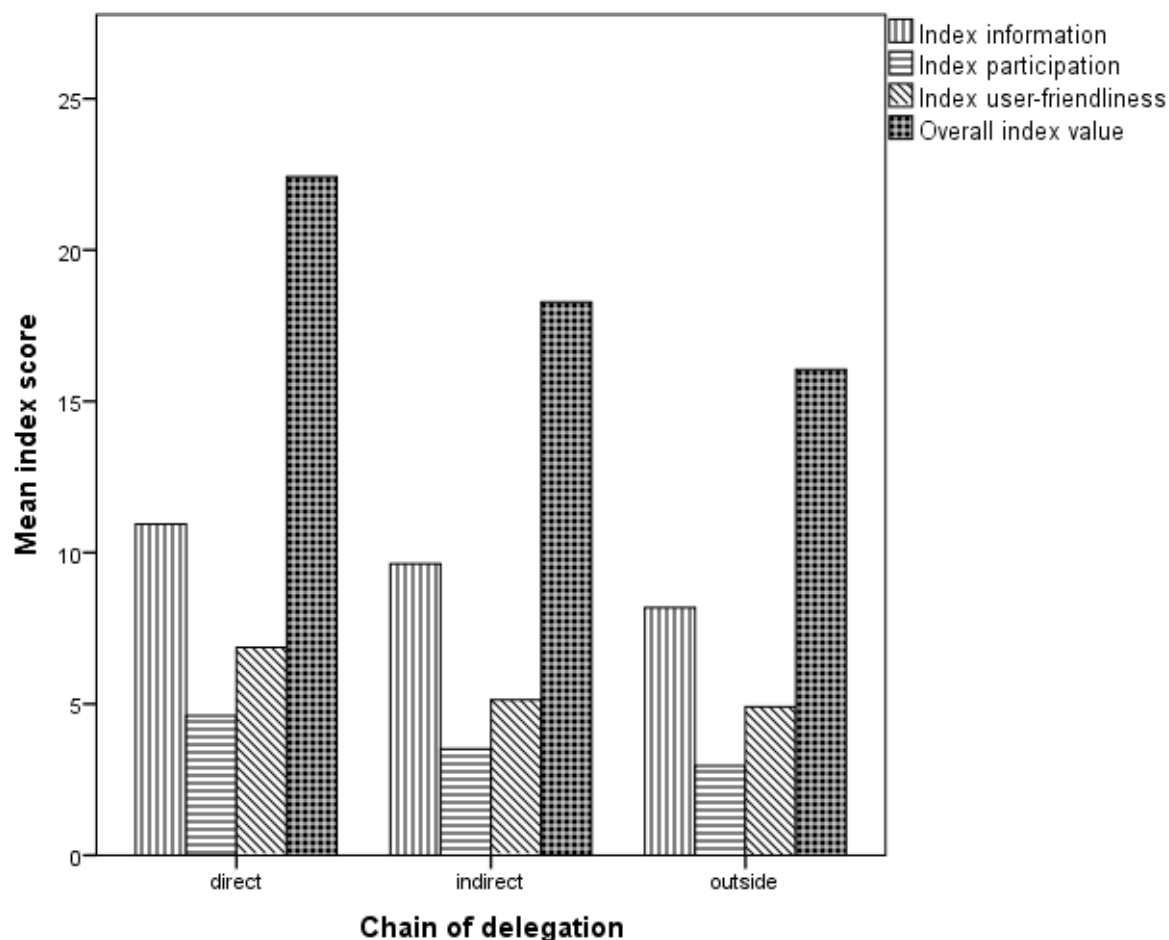
### **4.1 Website content and agencies' status in the chain of delegation**

Is the status of an agency in the democratic chain of delegation related to the way in which this agency presents itself on the internet? This was the main question formulated at the outset of the present analysis. Figure 1 suggests that there is a rather straightforward answer to this question and this answer is: yes.

Indeed, for all three dimensions of our index, as well as for the overall index value, scores are highest for websites that are run by agencies controlled by directly elected representatives. Websites provided by agencies that located outside the democratic chain of delegation have the lowest scores, while websites offered by agencies whose decision-makers are only indirectly elected are located in the middle. This means that, the more an agency is located inside the democratic chain of delegation, the more it makes information available and accessible to the public, and the more it is open to feedback by visitors of its website.

This finding supports the 'electoral pressure hypothesis' rather than the 'compensation hypothesis'. Online communication does not seem to be driven by the quest to compensate legitimacy deficits by agencies who suffer democratic deficits. Instead, it is agencies exposed to electoral pressure that seem to invest more resources in online political communication, as the higher degree of sophistication of their websites suggest.

**Figure 1: Mean number of points in index dimensions and overall index by agency's status in the chain of delegation**



However, given the small number of websites analysed in this paper, it is necessary to carefully consider this result and see if it can be maintained once we try to differentiate it further.

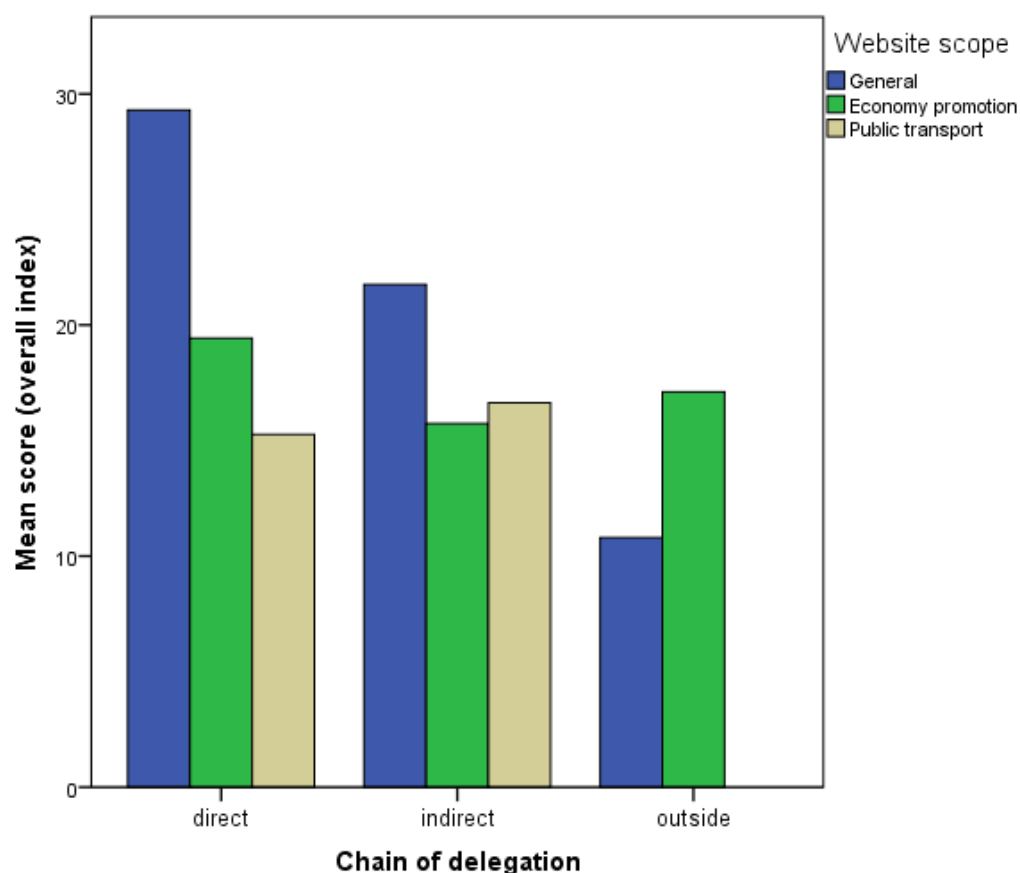
#### **4.1 Website scopes and city regions**

A breakdown of the overall index score of the website's provided by the various agencies according to the scope of the website allows to qualify this finding (Figure 2). For the 'main' websites, providing information on aspects of city-regional governance in general, it seems clear that the above identified finding still holds. Websites provided by directly elected bodies score clearly higher than those provided by indirectly elected bodies or, even more so, by organisations outside electoral control.

However, this effect is less clear for the fields of economy promotion or public transport. Indeed, differences between agencies according to their status in the democratic chain of

delegation are much smaller in the field of economy promotion, and nonexistent in the field of public transport (NB: in the field of public transport, there is no agency whose decision-making body comprises actors outside the democratic chain of delegation).

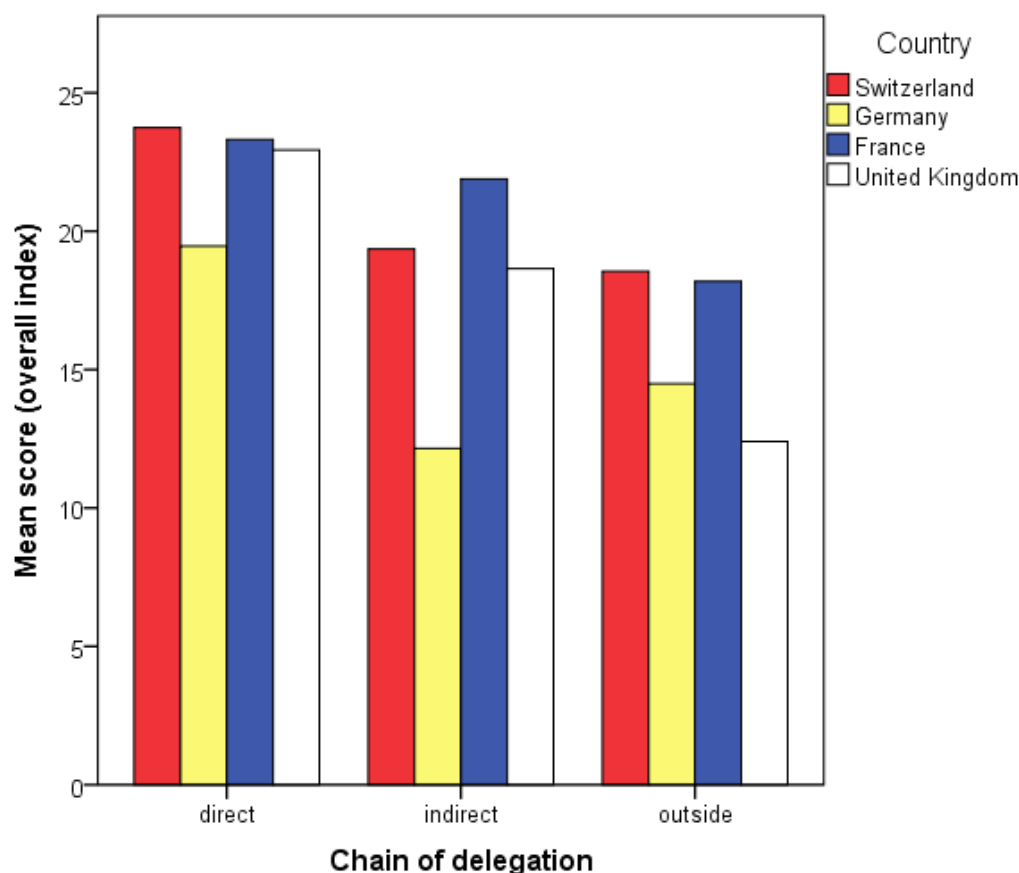
**Figure 2: Mean overall index score by agency's status in the chain of delegation, according to website scope**



Interestingly however, the finding seems to hold across the four national contexts under scrutiny (Figure 3). In all four national contexts, agencies controlled by directly elected officials have a more sophisticated website, than agencies located outside the democratic chain of delegation. Only the two German city-regions differ from the rest to the extent that agencies controlled by indirectly elected actors there seem to feature the least sophisticated websites.



**Figure 3: Mean overall index score by agency's status in the chain of delegation, in the four countries**



## 5. Discussion

The findings reported above have shown that online political communication has become important for agencies involved in city-regional policy making. In all eight city regions under scrutiny, websites were identified in all three selected areas: general metropolitan-wide coordination, policies of economic promotion, as well as public transport. Most of these websites were found to be of good quality, to make comprehensive information accessible, and to offer mechanisms for user contact and feedback. It is therefore quite obvious that investing in ICT has become a ‘must’ for agencies involved in management and public service provision at the city-regional level. In this sense, all of the eight city-regions under scrutiny have clearly engaged in becoming ‘smart cities’.

As we have seen, the extent to which they have done so can be explained, at least partly, by the different rationale that underlies the use of ICT as a tool to reach out to the wider public. In particular, electoral control as a mechanism to hold decision-makers accountable seems to constitute a strong institutional incentive for agencies involved in policy-making and service

provision at the city-regional level to invest in ICT. Agencies that are only indirectly accountable to the citizenry, or whose decision-making bodies include actors who are not at all accountable to the citizens, clearly have less sophisticated websites. Our evidence thus suggests that electoral pressure is a powerful mechanism to foster activities of online political communication. If we view investments into ICT as an indicator for the degree of smartness of a city, the results of the analysis presented in this paper suggest that electoral democracy makes cities smarter - at least within the broader context of the four Western European democracies under scrutiny here.

It is precisely this context, however, that also requires the formulation of some caveats to this general conclusion. In Western democracies organisations controlled by (directly or indirectly) elected representatives clearly enjoy a high or a very high status in the overall organisational nexus of public governance. They are the ones at the core of public attention, they benefit from independent power and, often, they also have considerable resources to go with it. They will very often also have higher degrees of organizational complexity and professionalization. It might thus not only be the electoral pressure they feel that makes them want to invest in ICT. We also have to take into account that it is the organizational capacity that enables them to effectively do so.

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## 7. Methodological Appendix

**Table 3: The selected websites: URLs**

City-region	„Main“ Website	Website Economy	Website Public Transport
Bern	<i>Regionalkonferenz Bern Mittelland:</i> <a href="http://www.bernmittelland.ch/de/index.php">http://www.bernmittelland.ch/de/index.php</a> [online October 2012]	<i>Regionalkonferenz Bern Mittelland, Sektion Wirtschaft:</i> <a href="http://www.bernmittelland.ch/de/themen/wirtschaft.php">http://www.bernmittelland.ch/de/themen/wirtschaft.php</a> [online October 2012] <i>Wirtschaftsraum Bern:</i> <a href="http://www.wirtschaftsraum.bern.ch/Events-1/home/?oid=1441&amp;lang=de">http://www.wirtschaftsraum.bern.ch/Events-1/home/?oid=1441&amp;lang=de</a> [online October 2012]	<i>Regionalkonferenz Bern Mittelland, Sektion Verkehr:</i> <a href="http://www.bernmittelland.ch/de/themen/verkehr.php">http://www.bernmittelland.ch/de/themen/verkehr.php</a> [online October 2012]
Zurich	<i>Metropolitanraum Zürich:</i> <a href="http://www.metropolitanraum-zuerich.ch">http://www.metropolitanraum-zuerich.ch</a> [online November 2012] <i>Kanton Zürich:</i> <a href="http://www.zh.ch/internet/de/home.html">http://www.zh.ch/internet/de/home.html</a> [online October 2012]	<i>Greater Zurich Area:</i> <a href="http://www.gza.ch/content/01/01_001de.asp">http://www.gza.ch/content/01/01_001de.asp</a> [online October 2012]	<i>Zürcher Verkehrs Verbund (ZVV):</i> <a href="http://www.zvv.ch/de/unternehmen-zvv/strategiebericht.html">http://www.zvv.ch/de/unternehmen-zvv/strategiebericht.html</a> [online October 2012]
Berlin-Brandenburg	<i>Hauptstadtregion Berlin-Brandenburg:</i> <a href="http://www.berlin-brandenburg.de/">http://www.berlin-brandenburg.de/</a> [online November 2012]	<i>Hauptstadtregion Berlin-Brandenburg, Sektion Wirtschaft:</i> <a href="http://www.berlin-brandenburg.de/wirtschaft/">http://www.berlin-brandenburg.de/wirtschaft/</a> [online November 2012] <i>Capital Region:</i> <a href="http://capital-region.de/sixcms/detail.php?template=cr_start">http://capital-region.de/sixcms/detail.php?template=cr_start</a> [online November 2012]	<i>Hauptstadtregion Berlin-Brandenburg, Sektion Flughafen und Verkehr:</i> <a href="http://www.berlin-brandenburg.de/flughafen-verkehr/">http://www.berlin-brandenburg.de/flughafen-verkehr/</a> [online November 2012] <i>Verkehrsverbund Berlin-Brandenburg:</i> <a href="http://www.vbb.de/de/index.html">http://www.vbb.de/de/index.html</a> [online November 2012]
Stuttgart	<i>Verband Region Stuttgart:</i> <a href="http://www.region-stuttgart.org/">http://www.region-stuttgart.org/</a> [online October 2012]	<i>Wirtschaftsförderung Region Stuttgart:</i> <a href="http://wrs.region-stuttgart.de/">http://wrs.region-stuttgart.de/</a> [online October 2012]	<i>Verband Region Stuttgart, Verkehrsplanung:</i> <a href="http://www.region-stuttgart.org/aufgaben-und-projekte/verkehrsplanung/">http://www.region-stuttgart.org/aufgaben-und-projekte/verkehrsplanung/</a> [online October 2012]
Lyon	<i>Grand Lyon:</i> <a href="http://www.grandlyon.com/">http://www.grandlyon.com/</a> [online October 2012]	<i>Le site économique du Grand Lyon:</i> <a href="http://www.economie.grandlyon.com/">http://www.economie.grandlyon.com/</a> [online October 2012]	<i>Grand Lyon, Déplacements:</i> <a href="http://www.grandlyon.com/Dplacements.55.0.html">http://www.grandlyon.com/Dplacements.55.0.html</a> [online October 2012] <i>Sytral:</i> <a href="http://www.sytral.fr/">http://www.sytral.fr/</a> [online October 2012]
Paris	<i>Ile de France (Conseil Régional):</i> <a href="http://www.iledefrance.fr/">http://www.iledefrance.fr/</a> <i>Grand Paris:</i> <a href="http://www.mon-grandparis.fr/">www.mon-grandparis.fr/</a> (offline) [online October 2012]	<i>Agence Régionale de Développement:</i> <a href="http://www.paris-region.com/index.jsp?LANGUE=0">http://www.paris-region.com/index.jsp?LANGUE=0</a> [online October 2012]	<i>Ile de France, Se déplacer:</i> <a href="http://www.iledefrance.fr/action-quotidienne/se-deplacer">http://www.iledefrance.fr/action-quotidienne/se-deplacer</a> [online October 2012] <i>Stif:</i> <a href="http://www.stif.info/">http://www.stif.info/</a> [online October 2012]

Birmingham	<i>West Midlands Regional Assembly:</i> <a href="http://www.wmra.gov.uk/">http://www.wmra.gov.uk/</a> (archived) [online November 2012] <i>West Midlands Councils:</i> <a href="http://www.wmcouncils.org.uk/home">http://www.wmcouncils.org.uk/home</a> (offline) [online November 2012]	<i>Advantage West Midlands. Regional Development Agency:</i> <a href="http://www.advantagewm.co.uk/about-awm/our-role/default.aspx">http://www.advantagewm.co.uk/about-awm/our-role/default.aspx</a> ( <i>archived</i> ) [online November 2012]	<i>West Midlands Local Transport Plan:</i> <a href="http://www.westmidlandsltp.gov.uk/">http://www.westmidlandsltp.gov.uk/</a> [online November 2012]
London	<i>Greater London Authority:</i> <a href="http://www.london.gov.uk/">http://www.london.gov.uk/</a> [online October 2012]	<i>Greater London Authority, Business &amp; Economy:</i> <a href="http://www.london.gov.uk/priorities/business-economy">http://www.london.gov.uk/priorities/business-economy</a> [online October 2012]	<i>Greater London Authority, Transport Strategy:</i> <a href="http://www.london.gov.uk/priorities/transport">http://www.london.gov.uk/priorities/transport</a> [online October 2012]

**Table 4: Index of website content: dimensions, variables, indicators and points**

Dimension	Variables	Indicators		Points
<i>Information</i>	Website Coherence	A1	Effort to find main site (only for main site)	0-1
		A2	Effort to find economy/transport website	0-1 (T&E) 0-2 (M)
		A3	Corporate design (only for transport and economy sites)	0-1
	Organisational Information	A4	How agency/organisation was built	0-1
		A5	Purpose and goals of agency	0-1
		A6	Information on process managing	0-1
		A7	Board and members	0-1
		A8	Partners	0-1
		A9	Organisational structure	0-1
	Issue Information	A10	Explanations/requirements on how to participate	0-1
		A11	Possibility to subscribe for a newsletter	0-1
		A12	News Feed	0-1
		A13	Up-to-Dateness News Feed	0-1
		A14	Event Agenda	0-1
		A15	Up-to-dateness Event Agenda	0-1
		A16	Reports, research on current project	0-1
		A17	Documentation about completed projects	0-1
		A18	Accessibility/ Information restriction	0-1
				<i>Total</i> <i>18 (M)</i> <i>17(T&amp;E)</i>
<i>Interactivity/ Reachability</i>	Contact	B1	Provides Information on how to communicate with agency	0-1
		B2	Provision of email and other addresses of agency employees/officials	0-1
		B3	Time answering an email (only for main site)	0-1
		B4	Chat/Forum	0-1
	Interactivity	B5	Online- (Feedback) forms/online opinion polls	0-1
		B6	Possibility to comment articles	0-1
		B7	Separate website for	0-1

	Social Networks		consultation	0-1
		B8	Other forms of consultation	
		B9	Own Facebook/Twitter Account	0-1
		B10	Account in use? Up-to-dateness	0-1
		B11	Possibility to share articles/website on Facebook/Twitter	0-1
		B12	Contacts per Week (not included in score)	0-1
User-Friendliness	Multimedia Content Navigation	C1	Interactive elements	0-1
		C2	Site Map	0-1
		C3	FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions -Section)	0-1
		C4	General search engine	0-1
	Service	C5	Information in other language	0-1
		C6	Download of important and helpful information	0-1
		C7	Possibility to order printed documents/buy information material etc.	0-1
		C8	Archives	0-1
		C9	Up-to-dateness of website	0-1
		C10	Press releases	0-1
		C11	Up-to-dateness press releases	0-1
				Total 11 (M, T&E)
			Results overall 40 (M) 38 (T&E)	

M= Mainsite; T&E= Transport and Economy Site

The detailed codebook and the coding instructions can be obtained from the authors.